Florida Bar Debacle Teaches Us Precisely the Wrong Way to Limit COVID-19

By Josh Bloom — June 17, 2020

Sixteen people walk into a bar... Sounds like an old joke, right? Except it isn't funny. Florida allowed some bars to open on June 5. One day later the 16 met in a packed Jacksonville Beach bar. All 16 came down with Covid-19. Perhaps someone ought to rethink that decision.

For those of you clinging to the idea that COVID-19 is nothing more than "the flu," an unfortunate (but entirely predictable) "experiment" in a bar in Florida should disabuse you of this myth. A group of 16 friends celebrated a birthday at Lynch’s Irish Pub in Jacksonville Beach on June 6th. The conditions were exactly what you’d expect - crowded bar, no masks. You don’t have to be Einstein to predict what happened next.

Within a week all 16 had caught the virus (as well as some restaurant workers and people who were not part of the party). This is just plain crazy. Germs don't do this. At least until coronavirus showed up.

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Flu is highly contagious. Norovirus (aka "stomach flu") is perhaps even more so. So is the common cold. But there is no way that 100% of a group that size is going to come down with any of these infections from a birthday party. Even in houses where families live together and kids bring home bugs from school, a contagious virus will sometimes hit all the family members, but sometimes only half catch it. Sometimes none of the others do. In this instance, and others (1,2), we have seen 100% transmission. Even during the times of the black plague outbreaks, this did...
not occur. Coronavirus is a different animal.

So is stupidity. Although there has been no shortage of stupidity during this epidemic it would be wrong not to give a special shout out to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

According to a CBS Miami report [1], one of the participants, Erika Crisp had this to say (emphasis mine).

> At the time, the virus was “out of sight, out of mind” since they didn’t know anyone who had contracted it and they heard from their mayor and governor that everything was fine... But within days, they started getting sick.

The response of the bar wasn't all that swift either:

- The pub was closed for "deep cleaning."
- Hand sanitizers are being installed
- Customers and staff will have their temperature checked upon entry.

This will accomplish exactly nothing. First, although the science is not complete, it is clear that person-to-person transmission is by far the most efficient way to spread the virus. It doesn't matter whether the bar is "deep-cleaned" or entirely rebuilt after a hydrogen bomb was dropped on it. The first day it reopens people will bring the virus in with them and we will probably see the same result before long. Hand sanitizers? Please. That might help if you snort the stuff (not recommended).

Checking temperatures might be of some use, but not much. Although there have recently been conflicting reports about the relative importance of presymptomatic and asymptomatic transmission of the virus, it is a certainty that some people without fevers will be contagious and allowed in where they will spread the virus. And people with fevers from other infections will be kept out. Neither will do any good.

Back to DeSantis...

“No, we’re not shutting down, you know, we’re going to go forward. We’re going to continue to protect the most vulnerable. You know, we’re going to urge, continue to advise, particularly our elderly population to maintain social distancing, avoid crowds.”

*Florida Governor Ron DeSantis*

Think about what he is saying here.

- Presumably, going forward means lifting more restrictions so that even more people can be stuffed into bars. Indoors, where the virus is far more likely to spread [2].
- From one party at one bar at least 24 people became infected. What happens when they go home to their families? Based on a transmission rate of 100% take a wild guess.
• Protecting the elderly seems like a noble endeavor but how is DeSantis planning on doing it? Not allowing anyone over 60 into the Petri Bar? Keeping us at home? Sounds like ageism and platitudes to me. Making early-bird dinners illegal (it's Florida - that won't fly)?

This is not to say that we should keep the country locked down. This is probably the worst solution of all. We cannot live that way. But there is a lot of gray between the black and white here.

For example, New York State and primarily NYC, which was absolutely clobbered, had more or less the same restrictions as other states during the late winter/early spring. But New York State's reopening strategy makes far more sense than that of Florida. Bars remain closed. Restaurant dining (as of June 11th) is now permitted, but it must be outdoors with the tables six feet apart. All restaurant employees must wear masks. People are allowed to go into stores depending on percent occupancy and spacing. Masks are required. The difference between this measured approach and the "let's just toss 'em in and see what happens" policy in Florida is huge. The results speak for themselves (3):

New corona cases in Florida (Left) and New York (right). Sources: (L) Johns Hopkins University, (R) New York City Department of Health.

Sorry, Governor but you can't have it both ways. There is absolutely no safe way to cram people into an indoor bar. You said, "we're going forward." Yes, you are. In the direction of the nearest ventilator. And it will be the result of a terrible public health policy. This one's on you.

NOTES:

(1) This is not an isolated incident. For example, in February a group of 13 people from the US went on a ski trip to Italy. All 13 caught the virus.

(2) Other bars in Jacksonville Beach have also closed because of Covid. What a surprise.

(3) No, the increase in cases is not due to more testing:
Tests conducted

Source: The COVID Tracking Project [3]